



Center for Early Education and Development

# Questions About Kids

## How Can Parents and Caregivers Support a Baby's Healthy Development?

How can parents and caregivers support a baby's healthy development? By working together to help babies master their most important job in the first year of life — to trust and feel secure in the world. When babies feel comfortable and safe, they can put all their energies towards playing, learning, and growing. Babies can form close emotional relationships, or attachments, with their parents and their other caregivers. Babies may act somewhat differently with their care-givers than they do with their parents, but they can still enjoy trusting, secure relationships with them. Both parents and caregivers perform the same kinds of caregiving tasks such as playing, soothing, feeding and changing. When adults respond to a baby's bids for attention and care accurately, consistently, and sensitively, the baby develops a sense of trust and positive expectations in the people and the world around them. Every positive relationship a baby has with an adult counts!

### Involved Caregiving and Teaching

Babies need their parents and other caregivers to be consistently involved with them. Adults who provide lots of appropriate touching, hugging, and holding, who talk and communicate often with smiles and other facial expressions, and who show happiness or joy when they are with the babies, are building the babies' sense of security. Research shows that babies who have secure attachments with child care providers have experienced more involved teaching than babies who are less secure. Providing appropriate stimulation and physical comfort, as well as meeting physical needs, are all part of involved

caregiving. Parents and caregivers who are tuned into babies recognize their cues, interests, and preferences. They know how to encourage learning and exploration, use touch appropriately, and skillfully meet each baby's caregiving needs.

### Harmonious Separations and Reunions

Even when babies feel comfortable and secure in their child care environments, separation from their parents may be difficult. Separation from caregivers may be difficult too, even when babies have close relationships with their parents. Parents and caregivers can work together to ease these transitions. By supporting a successful, less stressful separation, parents and caregivers give their babies someone to "go to" rather than someone to "leave from" (Raikes, 1996, p.61). Parents and caregivers, rather than food or toys, provide the comfort and emotional support babies need as they separate from their caring adults.

### Secure Base for Exploration of the World

Babies use their parents and caregivers as "secure bases" from which to explore their world. They are often "checking in" with their secure base in different ways, such as glancing, making noise, gesturing, or making physical contact. Becoming the secure base for a baby takes time, however, and is the result of many successful interactions. Babies have strong needs for a comforting physical presence that lessen with a growing sense of security. So



protests or crying may mean “I need you now until I feel more comfortable later on” rather than “I’m always going to need you to be this close to me.” Parents and caregivers who recognize babies’ needs for a secure base find that later on the babies are more comfortable and energetic in their play and exploration, learn more from their play, and interact more with others in their settings.

## Support During Times of Stress

If a family is experiencing stressful periods, caregivers can play an important supportive role for both parents and babies. Caregivers who build trusting relationships are able to offer support and comfort that is more easily accepted than if it came from an unfamiliar adult. They can help a baby establish a sense of security.

## Ways to Promote Trusting Relationships

Parents and caregivers who create positive relationships with babies promote babies’ healthy development. They know that by being involved caregivers, serving as secure bases for children’s exploration, and supporting smooth separations and reunions with parents, babies will likely have a trusting and worthwhile experiences as they grow. There are other benefits, too. Research is showing that when babies have secure relationships with caregivers, they also have more positive relationships with other children.

Trusting relationships give babies a “developmental advantage.” With this in mind, parents and caregivers can rethink some of the kinds of typical child care practices that make it more difficult to build and maintain relationships with babies, such as moving babies to a new class when they become crawlers; frequently rotating to “share” responsibilities; discouraging contact between a baby in a new room and her “old” child care provider; or not considering a baby’s home and cultural experiences. Babies need messages that adults they trust will support them in challenging situations so the babies can learn how to master difficulties.

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## For More Information

For more information about quality child care, call the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral at 1-888-291-9811 or go to <http://www.childcareaware.org/>

### References:

Howes, C. (1999). Attachment relationships in the context of multiple caregivers. In Cassidy, J. & Shaver, P.R. (Eds.). Handbook of attachment theory and research. New York: Guilford.

Adapted with permission from Raikes, H. (1996). A secure base for babies: Applying attachment concepts to the infant care setting. *Young Children*, 51(5) 59-67.

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## Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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The “Question About Kids” series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.